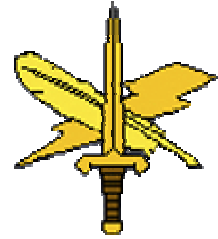




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BIKERS RALLY TO RAISE FUNDS, AWARENESS FOR WOUNDED SOLDIERS

By Lisa Litchfield
Task Force Dagger PA

It began with a casual dinner conversation. It will end with the Flint Hills Freedom Run, a motorcycle rally in Wamego, Kan., July 22 to benefit the Fort Riley Wounded Soldiers Fund.

Todd Nutsch and Tate Fisher, local businessmen and motorcycle enthusiasts, are two of the driving forces behind the freedom run. While neither has served in the military, they have close ties with families and friends who have.

Nutch's conversation with his sister-in-law while his brother Mark was serving with Army Special Forces in Afghanistan started him thinking there should something more out there for wounded Soldiers, he said. It wasn't until he met retired Command Sgt. Maj.. Brian Wells that he realized there was something more.

Wells, an active member of the Association of the U.S. Army, told Nutsch about the Fort Riley Wounded Soldiers Fund. Established in 2003, it is a non-profit charitable fund that provides financial assistance to injured Soldiers in times of financial distress.

Since 2003, the fund has provided more than \$100,000 in grants to wounded Soldiers. Most Soldiers don't know that the fund offers a \$250 stipend to any wounded Soldier removed from the theater of operation, Wells said. Further financial assistance is provided on a need basis. All the Soldier has to do is apply, he said.

This was the link Nutsch was looking for. As he put the conversations with his sister-in-law and Wells together, the idea for the bike rally was born.

"While we may have had the initial idea, it's been a lot of factors outside of us that have taken this to where it is now," Nutsch said.

One of those factors was meeting Staff Sgts. Nic Wetherill, Jason Briglin and Tim Johnson, all members of the "Dagger Brigade" – 2nd Brigade, 91st Division – mobilized at Fort. Riley.

The sergeants met Nutsch and Fisher while riding and started spending time with them. "I got involved because it is a good cause and we keep good company," Johnson said.

Nutsch likes having military members involved. "These guys have had service overseas in the sandbox. It gives a heightened sense of awareness of what we're doing when they are out there with us," he said. "People always think that Tate and I are in the military," Nutsch said. "Since we aren't, it is good to have the guys out with us that can give a face to the mission," he said.

Part of the intent for this rally, Nutsch said, was to come up with a new fundraiser for the fund. The previous fundraiser, yellow magnetic "Support Our Troops" ribbons, has become less viable because the market has been saturated with similar products.

The possibility of the rally becoming an annual event isn't being looked at until this first rally is complete. "It will depend on how good of a job we've done on logistics and planning," Nutsch said. "The event needs to be a success for the city of Wamego," he added.

Planning and promotion for the event has taken "hundreds upon hundreds of hours," Todd said. "Of course," he added, "planning would insinuate forethought."

Tate nodded in agreement. "It's hard to plan something when it's exploding in front of you and you're just trying to chase after it," he said.

The term "exploding" seems to be a little strong, but it's hard to come up with a better term when two businessmen are able to raise more than \$12,000 in less than 20 days.

"It's amazing the response people have had," Nutsch said. "Our posters have made it all the way from Nebraska to Colorado to Missouri. The biker community is a very charitable community," he said.

Nutsch added that this rally was significant because, "there's never been anything like this in this part of the country." Nutsch and Fisher are optimistic that this event will be a success and translate into an annual fundraiser for the Wounded Soldiers Fund.

While some may hear the term "motorcycle rally" and automatically think muscles, tattoos and beer, Nutsch and Fisher aren't worried about a perception that bikers are a tough crowd.

"Bikers today, all you have to do is look at the price tag," Nutsch said. Fisher agreed with him. "There are more CEOs at Sturgis (S.D. rally) than outlaw bikers," he said.

Nutsch said it was Fisher's idea to bring in an exhibition stunt bike team to help diversify the crowd. He said that events like this tend to get "pigeon-holed" as being only for Harley riders or for "cruiser" bikes. The hope for this rally is for a wide variety of riders to come and enjoy the event.

The rally is set up as a "poker run" with the best hand at the end of the day winning a cash prize. Nutsch said that the Christian Motorcycle Association, headed by Chuck Bramhill, has taken full charge of the poker hands.

“The amount of labor they are donating is huge,” Nutsch said. The CMA will man 10 stations at each stop during the rally. They are employing a secure “no cheat” system that will ensure that everyone has a fair chance for the winning hand at the end of the rally, he added.

During the poker run, which begins and ends in Wamego, the participants, “whether 200 or 2,000, will move as one group,” Nutsch said. “Local, county and state law enforcement will be involved in holding traffic as the group moves from one station to the next,” he said.

Nutsch stresses that while the rally is a time to get out and enjoy the companionship and camaraderie of riding together, the important thing to remember is that this is for the Soldiers.

“This is something they [the civilian population] can do to help” he said. “This fund is out there. We want people to know that it is available, and we want to raise awareness as well as raise funds,” he explained.